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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004926

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR ECA (IVES,KOUROUPAS), NEA
PARIS FOR US MISSION TO UNESCO

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SCUL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON MINISTER OF CULTURE,
DISCUSSES NEW SUNNI POLITICAL PARTY, CULTURAL AFFAIRS

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Ambassador met with ITG Culture Minister Nuri Al-Rawi on November 30. They reviewed the impact of Iraq's security situation on Iraqi cultural heritage sites and the promotion of Iraqi culture generally. Fourteen Iraqi cultural centers are planned worldwide (three in the U.S.). Al-Rawi also seeks return of Adhamiyah Palace in Baghdad for a UNESCO-supported library project. Al-Rawi offered his moderate Sunni Iraqi People's Movement as a vehicle to reach out to Sunni tribes in the Ramadi area. END SUMMARY.

CULTURAL AFFAIRS DIFFICULT;
BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP POSITIVE

2. (U) On November 30, Ambassador met with Minister of Culture Nuri Al-Rawi to discuss both the state of cultural affairs in Iraq and Al-Rawi's political aspirations. Al-Rawi, a moderate Sunni from Ramadi, is a candidate in the December 15 election. He thanked the Ambassador for the visit, his first to the Ministry of Culture. The Minister spoke positively of his interactions with the Embassy's Public Affairs Section and of his support for the U.S. presence.

3. (U) When the Ambassador asked Al-Rawi about the work of his ministry, he replied that, "it is going well and (focusing on) true Iraqi culture. We are starting with the children, to keep them from becoming involved in violence." He explained that his ministry is present in all of Iraq's governorates and often cooperates with the Ministry of Education. According to Al-Rawi, Iraq is a paradise for archaeologists, with at least 16,000 known sites and a potential 150,000 sites (after further exploration). Al-Rawi stressed that, because of Iraq's past, cultural programming is essential to help Iraqis accept a new, more peaceful future.

4. (U) Even though financing is difficult, Al-Rawi explained, cultural events are needed to introduce Iraqi culture to the world. Unfortunately, the security situation has hampered the Ministry's ability to conduct events inside Iraq. He noted some recent events outside of Iraq, including a cultural fair in Denmark, and announced that 14 Iraqi cultural centers worldwide have been planned and budgeted for, three of them in the U.S. The Ambassador and Al-Rawi discussed the possibility of an Iraqi cultural event in the U.S.: perhaps a traveling exhibit of traditional Iraqi dress, which Al-Rawi also offered to organize for Baghdad's International Zone residents.

5. (SBU) The Ambassador raised the issue of protecting historical and archaeological sites like Babylon, telling the Minister that one day, "cultural tourism could be bigger than oil" in Iraq, the birthplace of civilization. Al-Rawi responded that there are still problems with looting in Babylon and other historical areas. Al-Rawi requested vehicles and weapons to assist ministry guards in protecting these areas. He also requested an armored car for himself. The Ambassador promised that he would look into the possibility of MNSTC-I providing training for the ministry guards.

6. (SBU) Al-Rawi related that, with the assistance of the Italian government and UNESCO, much of Babylon has been restored and is now designated a "World Heritage Site." He suggested that future restoration work done in Iraq always be supervised by UNESCO. He also praised the Italian government for its assistance to the Iraqi Museum in computerizing its collections, given that the security situation still prevents the Museum from opening to the public.

LEADER OF MODERATE SUNNI PARTY

17. (SBU) Al-Rawi then shifted to describe his new political party, the Iraqi People's Movement (IPM), as moderate and Sunni. Its slogan, he said, is "agreement, not difference." According to Al-Rawi, the party's list contains 75 names and is active in ten governorates, especially in Mosul, Ramadi, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, Baghdad, Kut and Diwaniyah. He predicted his party will win 15 seats in the upcoming election.

18. (SBU) Al-Rawi stressed his support for the democratic process and expressed a willingness to have his party work with tribes in Al-Anbar (especially in Ramadi, his home town) to improve the situation there. According to Al-Rawi, Syria finances terrorist acts in Ramadi, and the local people feel defeated by Zarqawi and the Ba'athists. Al-Rawi believes that Iraqis in Ramadi want to stand up but are afraid that the U.S. might desert them one day. If they could be sure the U.S. would stay, he added, they would be willing to cooperate more, even more than with the ISF. (NOTE: Al-Rawi's allegation that Ramadi locals want coalition forces to stay is completely contrary to the general opinion of Ramadi leaders relayed repeatedly to visiting EmbOffs. END NOTE.)

19. (SBU) The Ambassador responded that he is willing to speak with the citizens of Ramadi to improve the situation, assuring Al-Rawi that it is important that the old regime and the insurgents not be allowed to destabilize the region. Al-Rawi repeated both his offer to arrange a meeting between the Ambassador and the Ramadi sheiks and his overall support for the U.S. effort. Then he wondered aloud what assistance the U.S. might give his party. He asked the Ambassador to intercede on behalf of two detainees being held in the area.

110. (SBU) COMMENT: After the opening discussion on cultural issues, Al-Rawi's ministry assistants slipped out of the room, leaving behind a journalist for the political discussions, who subsequently asked to interview the Ambassador. Clearly, this was at Al-Rawi's instigation on behalf of his party. Al-Rawi's attitude throughout the visit, including the political discussion and the media interview, remained upbeat and positive. His commitment to helping improve the situation in Ramadi seemed genuine, and he may in fact be able to organize a meeting for the Ambassador with local Ramadi leaders (several of whom Al-Rawi said he had met with that same day). END COMMENT.

KHALILZAD